United Nations S/2001/513

Security Council

Distr.: General
23 May 2001

Original: English

Report of the Secretary-General on the issue of refugees and internally displaced persons pursuant to resolution 1346 (2001)

Introduction

1. In paragraph 9 of resolution 1346 (2001) of 30 March 2001, the Security Council requested me to present my views on how to take forward the issue of refugees and internally displaced persons in and around Sierra Leone, including their return. These views are reflected below.

2. In the process of preparing for this submission, I have closely consulted the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers. I also asked the Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Carolyn McAskie, to gather views and information relevant to the Security Council's request during her mission to Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone from 17 to 26 April 2001.

Context

3. The refugee and internally displaced person crisis in the subregion is one of the most serious humanitarian and political crises facing the international community today. In total, there are over 1 million refugees, internally displaced persons and other war-affected victims in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone (see annex).

4. The present crisis has its roots in the civil wars fought in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the continuing control by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) over large parts of Sierra Leone, and the continuing instability and violence on the borders between the countries of the Mano River Union. The movements and presence of large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons in the West African subregion have serious humanitarian, political and security implications and present a serious challenge to the Governments and population of the subregion and to the international community. The response to this challenge should therefore take into account the linkages that exist between the countries in the subregion.

5. While many refugees were able to find hospitable communities in neighbouring countries with whom, in many cases, they shared cultural affinities and which were willing to absorb them, tens of thousands of others required assistance from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme and other agencies. At the same time, the presence of refugees in such numbers created a high demand for scarce resources and basic services and also led to significant pressure on the environment in receiving countries. Moreover, as a result of increasing tension in the subregion, the presence of refugees became a contentious issue, especially in Guinea. The heavy burden on the host State, the worsening security situation on the border, and the suspicion that refugee communities might be harbouring rebels or infiltrators led to calls for their early repatriation. Consequently, UNHCR encountered serious difficulties in providing international protection to many refugees in Guinea. As the situation deteriorated, many of them began to express their willingness to return to Sierra Leone.

6. In recent weeks, large numbers of Liberians have crossed into Sierra Leone to flee the fighting in Liberia's northern counties. The Government of Sierra Leone is in the process of identifying a location where

01-37970 (E) 240501

these refugees can be placed in a camp. A possible increase in this flow of refugees into Sierra Leone could place an additional burden on agencies and host communities that are struggling to meet the needs of Sierra Leonean returnees and internally displaced persons. I am also deeply concerned that the present fighting in Liberia will result in tens of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons to whom aid agencies would have no access. I call upon the Governments in the subregion to provide asylum, protection and assistance to these uprooted populations.

7. I am equally concerned about the very high number of internally displaced persons in Guinea, which is already carrying the burden of providing asylum to a large refugee population. The country is facing a serious humanitarian crisis of its own and requires international assistance to help it deal with refugees and internally displaced persons on its territory, and with the impact of their presence on host communities and the environment.

Asylum in Guinea

8. A significant number of Sierra Leonean refugees are located in a stretch of Guinean territory that is known as the "Parrot's Beak" or "Languette". This area has been and is likely to remain the scene of military operations by various armed groups and the Guinean army.

9. UNHCR therefore has a three-pronged policy approach to providing protection and assistance to refugees in Guinea. First, to relocate refugees away from the border areas further inland within Guinea; secondly, to address the ongoing emergency in the border areas; and thirdly, to facilitate voluntary repatriation to Sierra Leone.

10. I am pleased to report that since the High Commissioner's visit to the region in February 2001, the security situation has improved and UNHCR and other aid agencies have been able to access camps in the Parrot's Beak to provide emergency relief and to commence the relocation of refugees to sites further inland. Since the relocation exercise started in February, UNHCR has relocated some 43,600 Sierra Leonean refugees from the Parrot's Beak in the south-east of Guinea to safer areas further north and away from the border in the Dabola and Albadaria prefectures. Some refugees in that area are from villages directly across the border with Sierra Leone and they would prefer to stay in that area with which they are familiar.

Repatriation and voluntary return

11. At the same time, UNHCR is facilitating the voluntary repatriation to Sierra Leone of those who wish to return. For the time being, the repatriation from Guinea to Sierra Leone is organized by boat from Conakry to Freetown, where reception facilities are available.

12. A large majority of refugees come from areas which remain under the control of RUF and which therefore cannot yet be deemed safe for the purpose of return. At the same time, all efforts are made to ensure the temporary settlement of returnees in areas under Government control and to integrate them into the programmes established by the Government for support to internally displaced persons. A phased approach to the return of refugees to Sierra Leone would therefore be preferable to ensure adequate and sustainable reintegration.

13. With the deterioration of the situation in Guinea and Liberia and the gradual improvement of the overall security situation in Sierra Leone, Sierra Leonean refugees have begun to make their way back to Sierra Leone spontaneously. Since September 2000, more than 55,000 Sierra Leoneans have returned from Guinea. About 35,000 of these have returned by boat from Conakry since December 2000, with the assistance of the International Organization for Migration. The remainder returned spontaneously on foot through Kambia, Kabala, Kono district, Kailahun, Daru and Kenema. A significant number are believed to have returned to places in the areas under RUF control. In addition, refugees from Liberia have returned to Sierra Leone at border crossings near Zimmi.

14. Reports on the treatment of returning refugees in RUF-controlled areas vary. As returnees crossed through RUF-controlled areas in Kailahun and Kono, they were, according to some reports, subjected to human rights violations, including detention, abduction, forced recruitment and labour (especially of young men), robbery and rape. In addition, there are reports that RUF has tried to prevent refugees from leaving its area of control in the hope that this would attract humanitarian assistance. There have also been

reports that the rebels allowed returnees to pass unhindered, or provided assistance. Harassment of refugees has reportedly also been carried out by civilians and members of the Guinean armed forces inside Guinea. In response to these and other reports, UNHCR is stepping up its information efforts to make refugees aware of the risks involved in a spontaneous return through RUF-controlled areas and to inform them of their other options.

Assistance to returnees and internally displaced persons in Sierra Leone

15. Most returnees tend to settle in large cities and remain there as long as their areas of origin are unsafe. Returnees also assume that Freetown, in particular, offers greater safety and economic opportunities. As a result, cities like Freetown and Kenema host large numbers of internally displaced persons, returnees and ex-combatants, adding to a population which is already struggling with high rates of unemployment and scarce resources, placing a heavy strain on basic services, in particular water and sanitation. The capacity of transit centres in the Freetown area has reached saturation point and many returnees are reluctant to move on, thereby obstructing the admission of new arrivals. To deal with this situation, UNHCR is organizing convoys from Freetown to the provinces and to temporary resettlement sites. Several of these sites are being expanded and others are in preparation. However, the use of camps for temporary resettlement could perpetuate the dependence of returnees and internally displaced persons on outside assistance. Humanitarian agencies are therefore working towards making available arable land, providing jobs and building ties with neighbouring communities.

16. Overall, there is a limited capacity in Sierra Leone to deal with the growing influx of returnees and internally displaced persons. It is feared that the local infrastructure and basic services would not be able to cope with a mass influx, brought about by an optimism that the situation could improve significantly in the near future. Although the rainy season is likely to slow movement, once the rains start to subside in September and as the situation continues to stabilize it is possible that the spontaneous movement of refugees and internally displaced persons will regain momentum. This will require careful and comprehensive planning on the part of the Government of Sierra Leone and the international community.

17. It is anticipated that the population who remained in RUF-controlled areas and those who recently returned there will require significant assistance, since humanitarian and development agencies have not had access to those areas for very long periods and vital infrastructure is likely to have degraded to critical levels.

18. Moreover, refugees and internally displaced persons often include government workers, teachers and others responsible for providing basic services. The return of refugees and internally displaced persons is likely therefore to have a positive effect in this regard, as it may contribute to the restoration of government authority in Sierra Leone.

19. To deal with these challenges, it is crucial that humanitarian organizations have unhindered and safe access and that civil authority be restored as soon as possible throughout the territory of Sierra Leone. This requires the continuing forward deployment of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to establish the necessary conditions of security. The Mission's present experience is that internally displaced persons and refugees tend to react fast to news of UNAMSIL patrols and deployment and many plan and commence their return to their homes as soon as UNAMSIL has deployed there.

Kambia

20. As part of the agreement reached between the Government and RUF during their meeting in Abuja on 2 May 2001, RUF agreed to withdraw from Kambia district, which borders Guinea, and enter the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programme. Their withdrawal would be followed by the deployment there of the Sierra Leone Army and frequent patrols by UNAMSIL. The Sierra Leone Army would therefore be able to ensure the security of the border, which could result in the establishment of conditions conducive to a return of refugees to that district but, more importantly, would also enable some 30,000 Sierra Leonean internally displaced persons now at Lungi to go to their homes in Kambia. In principle, this would also enable other refugees in Guinea to return to Sierra Leone by road through the Kambia district.

Observations

21. The enduring conflicts affecting the countries of the Mano River Union have caused tremendous human suffering and large flows of refugees and internally displaced persons. These flows are, of course, the symptoms of a serious political crisis which needs to be addressed in all its aspects. Therefore, the best way to take forward the issue of refugees and internally displaced persons is to improve the political and security situation in the subregion and, in particular, to promote confidence-building and political dialogue between the Governments of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. I call on the leaders of these countries to meet as soon as possible and commence work towards these important goals. I also fully support the efforts by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has called on the Mano River Union countries to take individual and collective measures to curb the activities of armed rebel groups operating on their territories.

22. While refugees and internally displaced persons are primarily the victims of continuing hostilities in the region, at the same time their presence and movements place a heavy burden on host States, receiving communities and the environment and may complicate an already fragile situation. It is therefore important that the needs of refugees, internally displaced persons and the host States and host communities be addressed adequately. In this regard, I welcome the commitments of Governments in the subregion to honour the principle of asylum and protection of refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees. I also call on the international community to provide all necessary assistance to the Mano River Union countries, in particular Guinea, which has provided hospitality to refugees for a long time and shared precious and often scant resources with them. In this regard, I intend to study ways and means of improving the United Nations capacity for the coordination and delivery of humanitarian assistance to those in need in the subregion.

23. For the time being, I believe that the conditions for the immediate return of all refugees to Sierra Leone do not exist. A large part of Sierra Leone remains under the control of RUF and largely beyond the reach of humanitarian assistance and government services. The Governments in the region, UNHCR and other United Nations agencies must therefore continue their efforts to ensure the protection, safety and well-being of refugees and internally displaced persons on their territory.

24. While recent developments in Sierra Leone may give rise to cautious optimism, the fighting in northern Liberia is intensifying and could lead to a serious political and humanitarian crisis which has already led to new and increased flows of refugees and internally displaced persons.

25. At the same time, the overriding objective of the international community remains to facilitate the return of the refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes as soon as possible in conditions of safety and to assist them in rebuilding their lives. In the case of Sierra Leone, this implies an approach that aims, first of all, at establishing security throughout the entire country through the gradual deployment of UNAMSIL and the extension of government authority. Secondly, the Government of Sierra Leone and the international community should work closely together to maximize the capacity to absorb and assist returnees and internally displaced persons. Thirdly, it is vital that refugees in surrounding countries have access to the best possible information on the situation in their home country and places of origin, so that they can make a well-informed decision on the timing and route of their return. In this regard, the UNAMSIL public information unit and UNHCR offices in the region are in the process of improving their mutual exchanges of information and production of information materials and programmes, including radio programming.

26. I am encouraged by the results of the meeting of ECOWAS, the United Nations, the Government of Sierra Leone, and RUF, held in Abuja on 2 May 2001. The planned withdrawal of RUF from Kambia, and the subsequent deployment of the Sierra Leone Army and UNAMSIL in that area, has the potential of creating confidence, not only between the parties, but also for the return of refugees over land from Guinea and of internally displaced persons back into Kambia district. In this regard, I call on RUF and the Government of Sierra Leone to fully implement their undertakings made at Abuja on 2 May 2001.

27. I also call on the international community to make the necessary resources available to support the efforts of UNHCR, other United Nations agencies and programmes and non-governmental organizations to assist in the protection, relocation and return of refugees and internally displaced persons. However,

this effort cannot succeed if equal attention is not paid to the needs of those who stayed behind, to receiving communities, and the larger reconstruction and development needs of the West African subregion. In this context, it should be noted that the contributions received for the United Nations consolidated appeal for West Africa amount to only 8 per cent. Similarly, only 25 per cent of the funds required under the consolidated appeal for Sierra Leone have been forthcoming. I call upon donor States to make generous contributions in response to these appeals in order to alleviate the suffering of the population of the subregion and address the vital needs for reconstruction and human development.

28. In conclusion, I should like to pay tribute to the courage and devotion of humanitarian personnel in the West African region and elsewhere who work so hard to assist war-affected populations under difficult and often dangerous circumstances.

Annex

Refugees and internally displaced persons (as at 11 May 2001)

Côte d'Ivoire	Liberian refugees	120,000
	Sierra Leonean refugees	2,000
Guinea	Liberian refugees	81,500
	Sierra Leonean refugees	111,200
	Internally displaced persons	2,300,000
Liberia	Liberian returnees	377,500
	Internally displaced persons	60,000
Sierra Leone	Sierra Leonean returnees	71,200
	Liberian refugees	6,000
	Internally displaced persons	400,000